

recognised by historians. But it would need a poet to bring out its true depth of colour. The glamour and glare, so characteristic of the mightier French Revolution, is set off against a dark background of mediaeval English gloom.

When the fourteenth century opened, the agricultural system, which William the Conqueror's great census had found established throughout the country, was still in working order, though its decay had already begun. The 'Manorial' system, as it is generally called, was based on serfdom. The lord of the manor kept part of the tillage land to be worked by his bailiff for the supply of his own granaries, while the other part was cultivated in small patches by the peasants of the village. These men held their fields on a tenure which was, by custom if not by law, independent of the landlord's caprice; they did not suffer from evictions.¹ But their tenure, though safe, was heavily burdened; they were not freemen of the land, but villeins or serfs; they might not leave the estate; they were bound to the soil; they not only owed many feudal dues of various kinds to the lord, but were obliged to do service so many days in the year on the 'demesne,' the land worked by the lord's bailiff. It was on these fixed services that the lord relied almost entirely for the cultivation of this demesne. On those days that were not claimed by the bailiff, the serf could work on his own patch of ground, out of which he had to support his family and pay the few money rents due to the lord.

Such, in brief, was the basis on which society stood, such were the means by which the ground was tilled, during the feudal ages. The relation of the villein to the lord of the manor corresponded in idea to the feudal relation of the knight to the baron. The same personal dependence, the same debt of personal service as the condition of land-tenure, formed the basis of both. For many centuries it served England well. It was an organised system which prevented anarchy and perpetual social war. If it gave the lord rights, it gave the villein rights too. He owed only certain fixed services; he was not a slave to do the lord's bidding at all hours and

¹ Ashley, i. 1, S&